

Mexico's Native Communities Reverse the Flow of Accountability

They carried bows and arrows as symbols of their indigenous identity. Dozens stormed the Yuribia Dam, tied up the security guard and shut off the taps, cutting off the city below from its main source of water. State officials came personally to negotiate, arriving in luxury sedans with tinted windows, accompanied by an armed escort. Just one man – a local elite, a *mestizo* of mixed race – spoke on behalf of the indigenous communities to reach a settlement. As agreed, the men relinquished the dam, but the promises for new roads and better schools were never delivered.

Over ten years later, representatives from the various communities near the dam sat in a meeting with state and city officials. They praised the virtues of cooperation, smiled and joked. State officials complimented the local authorities on their thorough assessment of the environmental conditions in the watershed and announced the creation of a fund of 29 million pesos (£1.3 million) to be spent by the village collectives, under supervision of a watershed committee, for environmental restorations that would benefit local livelihoods and ensure continued supply of water to the city below.

What had changed in the intervening decade? The reconfiguration of power relations in southern Veracruz, Mexico came about partly as a result of a research project supported by the Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability and conducted by the National Autonomous University of Mexico and a non-governmental organisation, Decotux. The work was undertaken in the action-research tradition that considers the act of seeking change as a legitimate form of investigation. It has catalysed a shift from the patronage system that once benefited urban interests and local elites to a new, mutual understanding among actors that gives indigenous communities new resources and new responsibilities.

The case study demonstrates that building accountability and co-responsibility between numerous actors with diverse and contradictory interests requires an ongoing process of negotiation and engagement through both formal and informal channels. Here, accountability is not created by decree, by a right-to-information law or by inviting all stakeholders to a meeting; it grows, gradually, from a process that builds solidarity among indigenous communities and allows them to be recognised collectively.

In this together

In the hills of Southern Veracruz, Mexico, water seeps from natural springs and drips from the leaves of the rain forest's lush vegetation to form the Huazuntlán and Tezizapa streams. The streams flow past rows of corn on fields as steep as stadium seats, past patches of barren, smouldering land, past women and their buckets, through the legs of drinking cattle, until they converge at a dam. There, the water is filtered and chlorinated and diverted by a concrete channel, which splits at the base of the mountain, sending some of the water 60 kilometres to the leaking pipes of the city, and ultimately to shops and homes, and the rest to the steaming petrochemical factories and refineries that dominate this stretch of coast on the Gulf of Mexico.

Water connects everyone in Southern Veracruz, but not harmoniously. All the actors are also connected by the consequences of the persistent degradation of the basin; deforestation and erosion are contributing to a decline in water flows and quality. All stand to lose from the current situation, though few spaces exist for cooperation in mutual interest.

At the local level, each cooperative farm, village and municipality has its own assembly, but these spaces are often rife with conflict sewn by the uneven privatisation of land, competition for state resources, immigration, religion and party politics.

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Interaction between local institutions and federal and state government concerning water and natural resources are regulated by a legal framework that pays lip-service to participation but leaves no room for a negotiated settlement. The inhabitants of regions where the water supply originates are largely excluded from discussions, and when invited are often forced to endure the hostile and prejudiced attitudes of officials.

The obstacles to accountability here relate to the difficulty of enforcing existing laws and procedures designed to create a better planned system. Local institutions lack information about their entitlements within this legal framework and higher authorities lack the political will to integrate indigenous people in the existing participation spaces. There is no recipe for creating accountability. Power inequalities need to be confronted and new cultures of accountability nurtured.

From conflict to co-responsibility

Week after week during three years of participatory research, researchers acted as an honest broker between village leaders, informed them about the politics of water management in the region and facilitated a series of community-led environmental studies. This process gradually allowed village leaders to articulate their opinions without having to rely on municipal representatives who had for years served only their own personal interest.

Meanwhile, researchers met with local and state officials to advocate for new institutional arrangements over the long term, encouraging authorities to value the 'hydro-environmental services' provided by the farming communities – the practices and activities that contribute to watershed conservation and hence to protecting the water supply.

This work created an opportunity for change when a natural catastrophe required a rapid response. After torrential rainfall caused hundreds of landslides that damaged the dam, village leaders quickly assembled a recovery plan. Though still reluctant to cooperate with indigenous leaders, state authorities had nowhere else to turn.

Now there are mechanisms that may lead to greater accountability and sustainable management of the watershed. These include:

- a shift toward increased dialogue between communities and urban and political institutions, although this does not exclude the possibility of social mobilisations;
- the creation of a watershed committee involving the local authorities of 13 villages; and
- the elaboration of a plan for the ecological restoration and general development of the watershed, which was ultimately funded by the state government with 29 million pesos (£1.3 million).

Researchers stressed the importance of understanding the historical and cultural context, of creating new parameters for negotiation and of respecting the often slow pace of political and social change. Outside agents such as researchers, however, can only create an opportunity. In this case, change only truly began once indigenous community groups took the initiative to demand their rights, and after a natural event opened the way for a new relationship among actors.

How do you improve accountability around shared resources?

- **Understand the contradictions among local perceptions of rights:** Conflicting legal frameworks within the web of political and economic power make it difficult to institutionalise accountability mechanisms. The principles that underpin indigenous institutions, such as reciprocity and cooperation, can be reframed in terms of the management of common good.
- **Strategies for accountability need to be long-term:** Negotiation must be seen as a medium-term and long-term strategy dependent on many internal and external factors. The three-year outlook of a municipal government is not long enough to consolidate new institutional arrangements.
- **Change needs to take place on both sides of the equation:** Both the government and the community have to be more open to the possibilities of a partnership or dialogue. The government needs to create deliberative spaces open to all actors and respectful of the different perceptions, needs and proposals of others. The community needs to have better capacity to improve the management of their own water resources and put aside their internal differences.
- **Building alliances for accountability is vital:** The strengthening of alliances between different levels and forms of government is an important first step, in the hope that the cycle of conflict and environmental degradation can be ended. In order to foster integration between environmental management, forestry and water policies it is important that the relationship with urban water authorities be deepened.
- **Communities require autonomy to manage economic resources:** For a more efficient and democratic use of resources directed toward solving environmental and social problems, it is necessary to respect the autonomy of the communities and avoid intermediaries.

The Fabric of Accountability in Bangladesh's Garment Industry

Yakub, a machine operator at a garment factory in Bangladesh, recalls the first time he became involved in the workers' rights movement:

The movement began for many reasons, but the failure to pay arrears was the main one. Some of the older workers had not been paid their salaries for several months. Basically, they were the front-runners in this movement. They discussed all these issues with us secretly, though as newcomers we didn't understand much of it. ... The word spread among the workers that no one would work tomorrow. ... The next day, although all were waiting outside the gate, none were allowed to take their posts. The clamour began when all the workers tried to enter together, to break through the factory gate. The owner informed the police, and the police started beating the workers; many were injured. All the workers came down to the street, even those who didn't know what was going on. Basically, at that time, all the workers became united.

The process of globalisation has brought workers in poorer countries such as Bangladesh into direct competition with workers in wealthier, industrialised countries, exposing the stark inequalities in working conditions that exist between the two. Trade unions, the media and human rights activists have since made consumers increasingly aware of the conditions under which some of their goods are made. The international garment industry has come under particular scrutiny, with the conditions at Bangladeshi export garment factories featuring regularly in the campaigns of international advocacy groups.

The attention has led to the introduction of codes of conduct in the export garment sector, obliging companies to provide minimum labour standards for their workers in order to export goods on the international market. Research explored whether this compliance to codes of conduct or willingness to abide by a certain set of regulations, actually led to greater accountability in the garment industry.

This case study of the Bangladesh garment export sector shows that a context where companies adhere to codes of conduct is not the same as a culture of accountability where citizens mobilise to hold their employers and other companies to account. However, in the informal garment industry, where there are no formal codes of conduct, accountability mechanisms are being strengthened by an increase in trade union activity and collective bargaining and localised protest by workers.

Consumer awareness

The garment industry in Bangladesh is a combination of the export and domestic sectors. The export sector employs 1.8 million workers, of whom 1.5 million are women. The expansion of the export sector coincided with a period of radical economic reform in the late 1970s. Various incentive schemes channelled domestic investment into the export sector so that around 95 per cent of garment factories in the country are owned by local private capital.

Consumer awareness campaigns have highlighted the long hours, absence of contracts, delays in payment and violations of health and safety standards that Bangladeshi export garment workers face. A journalist at the Citizenship DRC Inception Workshop on Inclusive Citizenship in Bangladesh 2001 said, "The women workers in the Bangladesh garment industry have had more public attention to their rights than any group of workers in the entire history of the country."

Faced with the threat of bad publicity and boycotts of their goods, international buyers such as Nike and Gap adopted codes of conduct on working conditions (these international standards are different from the national labour laws drawn up by the state, which set out the rights of all Bangladeshi citizens). Failure to comply with international basic labour standards now carries penalties for the garment manufacturers that supply these buyers, most notably the potential loss

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of business. But has the proliferation of codes of conduct contributed to a culture of accountability?

Codes of conduct

The research showed that when companies that dealt with foreign buyers adhered to codes of conduct, conditions improved for the workers in the factories. In some large factories, health and safety standards improved and other benefits were introduced such as timely payment of salaries, proper overtime rates and maternity leave. Such changes were few, however, as many employers still managed to evade all but the most visible aspects of the codes of conduct.

The research showed that in the absence of a popular movement, codes of conduct do not necessarily lead to genuine accountability.

- Employers have formalised their relationships with each other and with the government, but relationships with workers remain exploitative and rooted in the informal economy. Few see their workers as citizens with rights and obligations.
- Although there is evidence of greater compliance with codes, it is due to the companies' vulnerability in the international buyer-driven value chain, rather than a genuine value of accountability. International brand-name companies are more concerned about their reputation than the needs of workers.
- Fewer than five per cent of export garment workers reported a trade union presence in their workplace, and only around 20 per cent had heard of the country's labour laws.

Seeds of accountability in the domestic sector

While the export sector is huge, most garment workers, many of them poor women, work informally and outside the export sector, beyond the reach of international buyers and codes of conduct. In economic terms, these domestic sector workers have little strategic importance because they do not bring foreign exchange into the country. The international codes are irrelevant to them, yet civil society leaders and some government officials have stood up to support them. It is still too early to declare significant improvements in accountability have occurred, but it is here that the seeds of a genuine culture of democratic accountability can be found – in the presence of popular movements.

Although workers are still largely unaware of their rights, they are less willing to tolerate injustice in the workplace. There are more visible signs of resistance such as resignations, shop floor protests, walk-outs and street protests over the minimum wage. Women interviewed as part of the research process appeared to be learning the principles of collective bargaining. Many of the actions were focused on getting paid regularly and for overtime, rather than on workplace conditions.

A number of developments triggered by the rise of the export garment industry could have positive future implications for them. These include:

- the new national labour code set out in law but yet to be adopted and implemented;
- proposals to transform the trade unions and improve relationships between political parties and trade unions, allowing better representation and ensuring employers are held accountable; and
- the emergence of a 'new' form of trade unionism within and beyond the garment sector that is more responsive to the needs of its members and to women members in particular.

Outrage and Social Organising in Kenya's Tenements

It is impossible to tell what colour the concrete-block tenements of Mombasa were originally; they have not been painted in more than two decades. The roofs, lacking proper maintenance, are a patchwork of tiles and corrugated iron. The donkey carts loaded with jerry cans are evidence that the decrepit pipes have long ago stopped delivering water, though residents are still forced to pay for the service.

But there is a limit to how much neglect and abuse residents of the council-owned housing will take. Like many of her neighbours, an elderly woman at one such estate received an eviction notice, backdated by several days. Wasting no time that night, a group of young men, employees of the council housing department, barged into her home and began dumping her furniture onto the street. Her flat would soon after have been corruptly 'sold' by the members of the council were it not for the outrage of her neighbours.

Neighbours surrounded the council housing employees, who swiftly fled, leaving the residents to return the elderly woman's furniture: one spontaneous act of resistance. More often though, these neighbours are channelling their collective indignation into organised, strategic actions.

The council tenants have struggled for ten years to influence public housing institutions and make them more accountable. In those ten years they experienced gains and losses, demonstrating that democracy is not a straightforward progression. This case study looks at how far struggles for basic rights by weak social groups are able to have an impact on public institutions and make them more responsive and accountable. It also examines what strategies the council tenant groups employed in order to effect change.

Mombasa's housing crisis

Mombasa is Kenya's sea port and its second largest city with a population of about 700,000. The city has

a recognised housing crisis. With low- and middle-income housing in short supply and deteriorating, slum areas are growing. People of modest income have two options – to live in houses built from mud and mangrove poles on unplanned settlements or to rent on council-owned estates constructed in the colonial era.

Issue-based movements like this one often fail to find political champions in Kenya, where parties prefer to curry favour among ethnic groups rather than ideological groups. The centralised system also encourages patronage. Many local decisions need approval at the ministerial level, yet Members of Parliament seem remote and unsympathetic to local citizens; many have themselves been implicated in land grabs in previous regimes. A further complication is a provincial administration system under the office of the President. The provincial administration is reputed to be a top-down, authoritarian and unresponsive structure. Levels of authority and responsibility between municipal government (councillors and council bureaucrats) and provincial administration (District officers and District Commissioners) are not clearly defined and relationships can get tense. The tenants in this case were able to leverage these tensions and navigate the ambiguity of authority to secure victories for their struggle.

Building a housing movement

On housing estates in Mombasa the municipal council has an obligation to maintain the houses, but has not undertaken any work since the early 1980s. Council tenants feel insecure in their tenure because corrupt practices in the municipal council lead to rigged waiting lists and backdated eviction notices. The crisis in public housing is linked to land grabbing and corruption among bureaucrats and politicians. Tenants from three estates, Tudor, Chagamwe and Mzizima, joined to form a Shelter Committee of ILISHE Trust,

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an umbrella advocacy organisation bringing together community-based groups in the coastal province. The Shelter Committee wanted decent housing conditions, functioning urban services, secure tenure and to fight against the grabbing of public land. They used a variety of strategies to mobilise and struggle.

Taking legal action

In July 2004 tenants received letters from the National Housing Corporation telling them that from now on they should pay their rent to the corporation rather than the council, and that the rent was increased. This action was prompted by a dispute between the council and the corporation over an unserviced debt. The tenants mobilised and instructed a lawyer to secure a temporary injunction preventing the National Housing Corporation from collecting any rent, pending a hearing to decide to whom exactly the tenants should pay rent.

Using media and other public fora

The tenants used media and public fora quite effectively during their struggle, particularly when a specific threat was imminent. In 1995 a concerted media campaign made the council shelve plans for a steep hike in rent, averting the full hearing of a court case that the tenants had initiated to challenge a rent increase. A high-profile media campaign thwarted the council's secret plans in 1997 to relocate Mzizima tenants to make room for a private housing development. In Tudor, tenants used media publicity to expose planned evictions to make way for a similar development and the National Social Security Fund withdrew from negotiations for the financing of the redevelopment. Residents in Changamwe carried out impressive investigative work and compiled a list of all the plots of land that had been illegally allocated and names of the people that received them.

Working local politics

In Changamwe, plots were illegally allocated to wealthy and politically well-connected people who constructed buildings that blocked access to public amenities. A task force headed by the District Commissioner at the provincial administration recommended revocation of the building approval but the Town Clerk was reluctant to take any action that the Councillors would disapprove of. The tenants mobilised and demolished a wall that blocked a road. They then took advantage of the complex official relationships at the local level and turned to the District Commissioner to rein in the excesses of their elected representatives, the Councillors.

What have the tenants achieved through their actions?

The only clear victories the council tenants can point to after ten years have been about staving off the worst harms – keeping rent at a reasonable level, reducing corruption and the illegal allocation of plots, and preventing new housing developments that threatened to displace them. These are no small achievements given the power of the business interests they have opposed. Their efforts, however, have not imprinted a legacy on the public institutions they have engaged with – in the form of a positive local or national policy change or in institutionalised changes in the practices and procedures of the Housing Development Department of the municipal council.

The absence of a long-lasting legacy is due to:

- the groups' fluctuating social and political power and narrow economic base;
- the groups' inability to distance themselves from a politics of patronage and ethnicity, and failure to cultivate a new way of engaging;
- a bureaucracy in which accountability systems have broken down and public officials have no incentive to be responsive to service users; and
- issues of scale that make it difficult for the tenants' localised actions to have an impact on national accountability failures.

The council tenants' groups are in a dilemma. On the one hand, this is a long-term sustained struggle to institutionalise accountability in a system characterised by impunity. On the other, it is also a struggle for a basic right. As a struggle for basic rights, it carries with it a sense of urgency about improving immediate living conditions. In order for them to recruit people to join and remain in the struggle, the tenant groups need to show them that sooner rather than later there will be some positive change in their immediate circumstances. This is not easy to resolve but it seems there is no shortcut to gradually building a genuine movement. As the council tenants have learnt from ten years of struggle, it is necessary to move from short-term protest to strategic action.

Keeping the Corporation Honest in Visakhapatnam, India

The politicians may have promised jobs, but the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) is clear that it never did. The contractor may have accidentally dug up the village's farmland, but the company is not to blame, since its instructions were not followed. And no one can prove that the fumes emitted by the plant are causing respiratory problems or that the open sewage from the company's residential colony provides a breeding ground for malarial mosquitoes.

One thing, however, is certain for the villagers of Visakhapatnam (Vizag) District, India. Whoever is the culprit, they have been the victims. Their farmland, pastures and salt fields have been gobbled up by the power plant's 4,000-acre facility or dug up for construction materials. The steaming-hot water from the plant's cooling towers has affected the fishing grounds closest to the coast. The paths that once connected the villagers to essential services are behind compound walls, which is no trivial matter to a six-year-old who now has to march three miles to school. The regional government told the company it could displace people from their land so long as it paid Rs. 2.25 lakhs per acre (£2,842), but that offers no compensation for the lost livelihoods of the landless workers who once earned a living working on others' farms. The new roads, bus services, jobs and professional training facilities that residents say would have fairly balanced the losses simply have not materialised.

The plant has brought benefits elsewhere, though. The coal-fired power plant that the NTPC built in Vizag was desperately needed, not least of all by the booming IT industry and agricultural trade in Andhra Pradesh state. The plant's start-up ended the debilitating power cuts, literally fuelling the economic growth that was lifting millions out of poverty in South Asia's biggest success story.

"We are being sacrificed for the national interest," said one resident. "We are the victims of this cause. What do we get in return?"

If the state fails to enforce the responsibilities of corporations under its jurisdiction or is even complicit in the violation of rights, communities face a unique challenge in holding institutions accountable. Vizag's residents compiled a list of the community's grievances and the evidence to back them up, then called the various powerful actors to a public hearing, where they had to respond directly to the findings before more than a thousand people. It may not have been a court of law, but the court of public opinion can at times be the best recourse.

Principles and promises

India's largest power producer, the NTPC is a symbol of national pride and, by its own account, a model corporate citizen. Its mission is to "be a socially responsible corporate entity with thrust on environment protection, ash utilization, community development, and energy conservation," according to its Web site. The company proudly claims that its 18 power stations have received ISO 14001 certification (the gold standard for minimising the environmental effects of a business) and publicises its membership of the UN's Global Compact, which sets ethical principles related to human rights, labour, the environment and anti-corruption. The company's policies reflect these ideals, and it still manages to earn handsomely. According to its annual report, the company earned nearly £1.3 billion in profit during the fiscal year ending March 2008.

In at least one case, however, the company's practice has strayed from its principles. The case concerns the Simhadri Thermal Power Project, which was commissioned by the Andhra Pradesh State Electricity Board to be built in Paravada, 40 kilometres from Vizag. With support from Japan's Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund the state signed a power purchase agreement with the NTPC in 1997, and construction started in 1998 after 3,140 acres of land was acquired from 13 villages spread over three mandals in the Vizag district.

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The project affected no fewer than 2,841 households with a total population at the time of 11,960. Predominantly fishermen, farmers and salt traders, the neighbouring residents were living in tiny clusters of semi-brick shanties with temporary roofs. In return for their land, villagers were promised new roads and bus service, training facilities, jobs and cash compensation. With the exception of the cash, none of these promises were kept.

Undereducated and often ill-informed of their rights, villagers were at a legal disadvantage. Several disputes relating to land ownership were trumped by legal manoeuvres, or overtly repressed. According to land acquisition officers in Hyderabad, some of the farmland around the NTPC site was classified as "wasteland," land that is not fertile or productive, in spite of clear evidence to the contrary. There were also allegations of threats being issued by police when one community refused to vacate because the residents had records indicating that they had rented the land from the government, contradicting government claims.

Once the plant started operating in May 2002, the situation was aggravated by rising health problems in the communities, which many residents attribute to the air and water pollution produced by the plant and its residential colonies. Yet so desperate is the economic situation that many people told researchers they would tolerate these adverse effects if they were to receive some work as compensation. Suffering the downside of this industrial development without reaping any of its benefits is what fuels their sense of injustice.

Fitting together the pieces of the puzzle

In Vizag, Sadhana (a Paravada-based nongovernmental organisation) has been on the frontline of the campaign for the rights of those affected by the NTPC plant, with collaboration from researchers at the Institute of Development Studies and the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA). These organisations conducted surveys and gathered data, recording demands and evidence of rights violations and health impacts. The findings from these surveys were presented at a gram sabha (local assembly) as well as at panchayat raj meetings. The contents of the research and subsequent discussions were then fed into a People's Development Plan, which presented the community's view of how the grievances could be adequately addressed in mutually beneficial ways. Community members proposed supplying pickled foods to the company's canteen, while recognising the need to meet minimum quality standards. Likewise a women's self-help group proposed an agreement that would allow them to supply uniforms to workers at the plant.

With a solid negotiating position and evidence for their claims, the communities then invited officials from the company, plus the state and federal governments, to a public hearing hosted within the community, in the presence of ordinary citizens.

Public hearings are seldom held in advance of a major industrial development in India, despite a formal obligation to do so. When they are, they often poorly advertised at short notice and in English, which means they are not accessible to most people potentially affected by the development. Alternative citizen hearings provide a space for people to make their voices heard, and an

arena where multiple stakeholders can be encouraged to each take on unique responsibilities that provide a more comprehensive solution, like "matching pieces of a puzzle," as one researcher described it.

"What we were doing was multi-stakeholder participation, but that term didn't exist at the time, so we used a term that did exist: public hearing," said Harsh Jaitli, one of the researchers from PRIA.

Following the public hearing, several journalists were invited to a press conference given by the researchers and activists. Negative publicity has often made the company more responsive. For example, the day after one newspaper carried a story about an information-sharing meeting organised by PRIA on the health impacts of the plant, the Pollution Control Board conducted tests for water pollution in the area. There is, however, always a concern that too much media attention can encourage a company to retreat from public debate, and the danger that the media will identify opponents of industry as a nuisance.

How can affected communities more effectively demand accountability from corporations?

- **Pursue a multi-pronged strategy:** A successful strategy is likely to include a mix of media work, direct dialogue with companies and government, public hearings and, if necessary, lawsuits. The use of citizen-based methodologies is especially important to mobilise broad community engagement, including citizen health monitoring, public hearings and People's Development Plans.
- **Mobilise often, mobilise early:** If bargaining takes place once the proposed project has the go-ahead or construction is under way, the chances of getting the company to respond to demands and grievances are significantly reduced.
- **Move beyond compensation:** There are limitations to viewing financial compensation as the ultimate goal of an accountability struggle or as an adequate substitute for political reform.
- **Remain accountable, even when fighting for accountability:** One danger is that NGOs become cast as the legitimate representatives of the community in dialogues with industry. NGOs such as Sadhana are keen to play a supporting role, but community members themselves may be reluctant to show leadership. Hence a strong commitment to this principle is important.
- **Recognise that legal-constitutional rights are not a guarantee:** Some of the poorest workers were displaced because they lacked land titles, but even having rights to the land was insufficient to protect others. If communities are not aware of their rights, or are powerless to claim them, "having" rights is not enough.

Ultimately, the case underscores how corporate accountability cannot be provided by acts of philanthropy alone. Such approaches assume a willingness on the part of the companies to engage in open, public dialogue about their responsibilities, admit wrongdoing when necessary and take remedial action when negligence has occurred. These lessons are especially relevant to countries, such as India, that are undergoing fast, state-led economic growth. Where legal-constitutional and state-based forms of accountability are weak, active citizens are essential.

Getting to the Bottom of the Story with Theatre for Development

The village chief is trying to look calm, but it's obvious that he's nervous.

'What has happened to the money?' the two men, still standing, ask.

'It's in a bank,' he offers feebly as an explanation, which gets the audience snickering.

The members of the audience find the theatrical performance darkly humorous because they recognise the deception. In the oil-producing region of the Niger River Delta, even the once revered traditional leaders have been corrupted, leaving the communities adrift.

Researchers from the Theatre for Development Centre (TFDC) at Ahmadu Bello University used participatory theatre as a methodology for encouraging discussion among communities of the Niger Delta on the breakdown in accountability of local and state leaders to citizens. Most research on accountability in Nigeria has looked at the high-ranking actors – the governors and oil company executives. This research, by contrast, looked at problems through the eyes of the community members, by transforming them into scriptwriters and actors.

The process of winning community cooperation in the theatrical performances began the same way in each community, by following an old tradition. Researchers would visit a community elder with a bottle of schnapps, kola nuts and some money, perhaps 200 naira, under the nuts to 'wedge' them in place. After the elders listened, they would often begin with a similar lament. The youth in the community simply do not listen any more. They used to listen to stories after dinner about society and morality, but now all that interests them is easy money.

Or perhaps they just need new stories. The drama above, performed in Sanubi, Delta State, was entitled 'Unfulfilled Promises' and addressed issues from the denial of rights through to collusion, corruption and violence.

In the drama, oil is found on the farm of one of the community members. The chief tries to deny the landowner his compensation money on the grounds that his forefathers were slaves, evoking a controversial stipulation in the Nigerian Constitution distinguishing between the rights of 'indigenes' and 'settlers'. The situation is inflamed when contractors hired by the oil company Royal Dutch Shell rip up several farms in the community to lay pipes. The performance ends with local thugs beating back protesters who are chanting 'Shell o! Emo! Emo!' (Shell o! It is war! It is war!).

The dramas in every community were distinct, but each demonstrated how the corruption resulting from oil production is interwoven with inter-community and even inter-family divisions. When cooperation and solidarity arise, powerful actors can easily exploit different cleavages – gender, religion, ethnicity. Increasingly though, and with the aid of such tools as community theatre, community members are beginning to recognise their shared plight.

The burden and blessing of oil

Large-scale oil production in Nigeria began in 1958. Now among the world's top ten oil-exporting countries, Nigeria relies on oil for more than 80 per cent of its government revenue. Most of that production is through joint ventures with foreign companies, the largest of which (with Royal Dutch Shell and ELF Petroleum Nigeria) accounts for about half of the country's total crude output. Oil revenues in 2008 earned the country an average of US\$2.2 billion every month.

This abundance of resources is commonly considered more of a burden than a blessing for Nigeria. The 'resource curse' is attributed to the undermining of accountability at every level in the country, earning Nigeria the dubious distinction as one of the top twenty most corrupt countries in the world, according to the 2008 World Bank Governance Indicators.

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In addition, oil production has been associated in Nigeria with allegations of human rights abuses and environmental devastation in the Niger Delta, which refers to both the immediate area where the River Niger splinters into tributaries and empties into the Atlantic Ocean and to some of the contiguous states where oil is found. The Scotland-sized area, criss-crossed by marsh and creeks, is home to 31 million people from more than a dozen distinct ethnic groups and is also the site of the country's most important oil fields.

In spite of its oil wealth, the region has inadequate infrastructure and high unemployment rates, in part because pollution from the oil industry has diminished forest activities and fishing. Residents of the delta states have to drink, cook with and wash in polluted water, and eat fish contaminated with oil and other toxins.

Global scrutiny of the region intensified following the execution, ordered by a military tribunal in 1995, of activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, who had led a non-violent campaign against environmental degradation caused by Royal Dutch Shell and other multinational oil companies in his native Ogoniland.

Since then, many other groups have emerged from the region to demand a more equitable share of the bounty; women's and youth organisations have become highly mobilised. These groups protest, negotiate with government on behalf of the communities and monitor the award of contracts and the employment of workers in the oil sector, functioning as watchdogs and pressure groups. Yet the struggle for accountability is also rife with its own accountability challenges; groups that set out to broadly defend the rights of the communities have ended up pursuing shorter-term gains, and some members of these groups, especially young men, have increasingly turned to violence.

Since 2006, rebel groups led by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, or MEND, have resorted to kidnapping oil workers and sabotaging oil facilities. These groups claim they want to win a greater allocation of the oil wealth for their impoverished people, but some of their members have become armed bandits, using political grievances as a guise for personal enrichment, or have formed gangs committed only to the interests of their village.

The result is that the people of the Niger Delta are frustrated and angry, feeling excluded from the benefits of the natural resources in their region, and yet at the same time unable to rely on many of the actors that would ordinarily be trusted with defending their rights. It is in this context that the TFDC has been employing its unique use of drama.

The democratic nature of drama

Performance art is an especially effective tool for carrying out research that aims to raise consciousness, foster local knowledge and spark social action because it opens a space for dialogue that practically anyone, regardless of background, can enter. Drama does not discriminate against the illiterate, and allows people to express their

views in their own unique language and manner. In the circumstances of fear and distrust that predominate in the Niger Delta, drama brings other benefits. Its ability to dismiss itself as fiction, and to deliver fun to the gathered crowd, also makes it a safer way to discuss the accountability failures facing their community.

In the Niger Delta, The Theatre for Development Centre – with years of experience in this methodology – sent facilitators into eight communities (four in Bayelsa State and four in Delta State) in the Niger Delta region. The facilitators worked with liaisons in each community who were well known and respected among their neighbours. The facilitators in turn selected key participants – teachers, community group leaders and other influential figures – who were trained over three days on how to create a 30-minute theatrical performance. Over the course of the three-day training, the participants explored the issues of accountability through the creation of the performance. Finally, the entire community was invited to watch, followed by a discussion that produced a community plan for action.

Something taken, something left behind

The use of theatre as a research methodology was successful in garnering new insights into the nature of accountability in the Nigeria Delta, including on:

- how a lack of accountability in formal governance structures can fracture the trust and solidarity that protects communities from outside manipulation, even corrupting the very institutions that claim to seek solutions; and
- how these fractures sow conflict and violence in a vicious cycle that further impoverishes the community.

While revealing these insights to researchers and practitioners, theatre is also a powerful tool for raising local consciousness and spurring positive action. The research process is democratised by theatre in three ways.

- It creates a space in which people can speak and bring issues forward for discussion.
- It allows them to make suggestions about what is to be done.
- It challenges power relations within the community, creating a space in which to question roles and hierarchies within the community.

In contexts of violence or human rights abuses, researchers may feel an extraordinary obligation to leave something useful behind. Theatre for development is one such methodology for understanding complex problems, while at once providing a tool for overcoming them. The links between the performance and the action afterwards are multiple: the performance has identified gaps and established a basis for further dialogue, eventually leading to a congruence of concern between community members and possibly a common agenda. The will to act, however, can only be fostered in the long term through the social organising that invariably must occur before and after the final curtain call.